

Anna Burnham:

Good morning. And welcome to Morning Prayers in Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton psalter book, Psalm 34, found on page 17. Please remain masked and stand, as you are able, to read responsively by the whole verse. I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

Congregation:

My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

Anna Burnham:

Oh, magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together.

Congregation:

I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

Anna Burnham:

This poor soul cried and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every trouble.

Congregation:

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Anna Burnham:

Come, oh children. Listen to me. I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Congregation:

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.

Anna Burnham:

The face of the Lord is against evil doers to cut off the remembrance of them from the Earth.

Congregation:

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.

Anna Burnham:

He keeps all their bones. Not one of them will be broken.

Congregation:

The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Choir:

(Singing)

Karen King:

Good morning. A reading from the gospel of Matthew, chapter five, verse 48. You, therefore, must be perfect, even as your heavenly father is perfect. No verse seems more impossible. This is a no win before we even get started. But it gets worse. The instructions for perfection include do not resist evil, but turn in the other cheek in order to be struck again. If somebody steals your coat, give them your shirt and pants. If someone forces you to carry their load for a mile, go two. Give anything to anybody who begs or borrows. Love your enemies. So what is Jesus saying? Evil wins? Our faces are bloody? We are naked and destitute and all from this, from enemies, we are supposed to love? Really? What about working against evil for good? What about justice? What about combating climate change, and war, and racism, and all the other harms and devastations?

Wait, what about my complicities in all of those and more? It may very well be that I deserve to be hit, that I have hoarded piles of clothing and ate well when others are cold and naked. It may be that it is more than my turn to carry the load for a while. It may be that persons asking should rightly have all I can give. It may indeed be unclear who is the enemy of whom. All true, yet it may nonetheless be that I have missed the point. Jesus says to love our enemies, quote, "so that we may come children of God," a God who makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends refreshing, life giving rain on the just and on the unjust.

It would seem that it is God who turns the other cheek and goes the additional mile for us, God who gives when we ask and loves all. God's justice, then, looks a lot like mercy. The second century theologian Clement of Alexandria writes about a person named Epiphanius, who wrote a book called On Righteousness. Now, righteousness is not a term we use much, although we practice self-righteous maybe a bit too much. But my computer dictionary defines it as the quality of being morally right or justifiable. The thesaurus is a trove of words I love like goodness, justice, honesty.

According to Clement, this Epiphanius taught that, and I quote, "God's righteousness is a kind of social Equity. There's equity in the way the sky is stretched out in all directions and embraces the Earth in circle. The night is equitable in displaying all the stars. From above, God pours out the light of the sun, which is responsible for the day, and father of the light over the earth equally for all of those with the power of sight. The gift of sight is common to all. There is no distinction in between rich and poor, ruler and ruled, fools and wise, female and male, slave and free. He treats even irrational animals no differently. On all of the beasts he pours out his sunlight equally from above. He ratifies his righteousness to good and bad so that no one can have more than their share or deprive their neighbors so as to have twice as much light as they."

It may be, then that Jesus' teaching in the gospel of Matthew is not asking for the impossible, but in his own typically outrageous, radical way of speaking, he is quenching fear, resentment, grief, and anger, and instilling a sense of gratitude. It may be that it is this gratitude that opens out to generosity, and generosity to love, love that doesn't fear loss or judge the worthiness of others, but circulates what has been given to us all in social equity. But love is no simple thing. It's a word bandied about with ease, but it is hard, very hard. It requires skills that come only with practice and wisdom. Love requires hard work. And yet our love fails. It is when you fail someone you love utterly, even unto death, that you know what grief really looks like. Who does not grieve? Who cannot count losses, pain that sears hopes that are drowned? Who does not fear? Who is not angry?

And yet, Jesus stands up on a mountain in front of a big crowd of people who are just like that, just like us. They are tired. They are hungry. They're going through hard things in their lives. What does he tell them? Be perfect as God is perfect. He tells them in his own challenging way that God does see the evil that is being done, the injustice, the violence, the hunger and homelessness, the grief and anger, the deep tiredness in our bodies and souls. But Jesus sees in all this the opportunity to get up and walk the hard path of love, the love of enemies. This requirement of perfection points not to judgment or condemnation, but to God's perfect mercy, a mercy that sends the sun and the rain on every living thing, just and unjust. That is, on us.

The hard path of love, then, starts with gratitude for life, for those we cherish and those we don't, for memory of those lost, for those startling moments of beauty, and the myriad kindnesses of others, known and unknown. Gratitude then moves to generosity to let resentment and fear go, and give, give to all, freely, out of an overflowing gratitude, for Jesus' demand to be perfect is neither a condemnation of our character, nor is it an impossibility. It is an invitation to participate in God's perfect generosity.

So let us ask now in prayer and in meditation, may we see in every sun beam, every cloud, every beauty, the glorious generosity of God's perfection. May we be filled with gratitude to begin and persevere in the hard work of love. May we be granted the strength, and the courage, and the wisdom to seek the truth always and everywhere, come what may, and cost what it will. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand, as you are able, and together, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us.

Anna Burnham/Congregation:

Saying our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on Earth as it heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. And together, let us sing the hymn This Is My Song, Oh God of All the Nations, number 29 found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(Singing)

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Anna Burnham:

Go forth into the world in peace. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other, today and every day. And together, let us say amen.